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ABSTRACT

Hispanic parents have been slow to overcome their historical reluctance to turn their young children over to nonfamily members for care, but the educational boost preschool provides is particularly important for the one-quarter of Hispanic American families who are poor by Federal guidelines. This digest describes the strategies and programs specially designed to meet the early education needs of Hispanic children, and reviews efforts to recruit the children, involve their parents, provide parent education, and provide a range of social services. Persuasive and culturally sensitive recruitment strategies, especially if implemented in the parents' native language, are useful in bringing children to preschool programs of various types. Preschools that serve bilingual and multicultural students do well to draw on the children's native cultures and languages. Most early education programs emphasize literacy development, whether monolingual or bilingual. Regardless of other competencies, the teachers of nonnative English speaking children should be able to communicate in the children's home language and be sensitive to their cultural backgrounds. (Contains 24 references.) (SLD)



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Hispanic Preschool Education: An Important Opportunity. ERIC/CUE Digest #113

Wendy Schwartz

ED 405 398

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

# DIGEST

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## HISPANIC PRESCHOOL EDUCATION: AN IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY

Young children learn many language, social, and practical skills in preschool that benefit them immediately and also enhance their chances for future achievement. For poor children, preschool helps to offset the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive burdens that can result from their living situation. For those who speak little or no English, preschool can provide a valuable bilingual education (Kagan, 1995). In recognition of the benefits of early childhood education, increased Federal funds have recently become available for preschool programs and for incorporating transition-to-school activities into them (Kagan & Garcia, 1995).

Nevertheless, Hispanic parents have been slow to overcome their historical reluctance to turn their young children over to non-family members for care. Nearly half of Hispanic mothers stay at home to raise their children. Even parents who need child care frequently prefer using relatives rather than a preschool, given the size and strength of extended Hispanic families and traditional deep concerns about child safety (Fuller et al., 1994). Also, many Hispanic families cannot afford private preschools. According to one survey, with findings similar to many others, less than 26 percent of the 313,000 Hispanic 3- and 4-year-old children attended nursery school in 1994, whereas nearly 43 percent of all children in the U.S. did so (Bruno, in press). Thus, Hispanic children may enter kindergarten without the academic preparation that their peers have, and without the good educational start that would provide them with a positive attitude toward school and a sense of themselves as intellectual beings (Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1992). Indeed, the dropout rate among Hispanic youth is among the highest of the ethnic groups in the U.S., and many of those who do graduate from high school have not acquired the kinds of skills that will lead to greater employment opportunities.

The educational boost that preschool provides is particularly important for the one-quarter of Hispanic families that are poor by Federal guidelines. While Hispanic families are like others in that they want their children to succeed in school, poverty can seriously impede children's academic success and their parents' ability to actively foster high achievement.

This digest describes strategies and programs specially designed to meet the early education needs of Hispanic children, particularly those whose families suffer from poverty. It also reviews efforts to recruit the children; to involve their parents in activities that will enhance their children's learning; and to provide parents with literacy, job, and other skills training, and a range of social services. Hundreds of such programs, developed by community leaders and educators around the country, are now operating.

The review here examines preschool experiences in situations where the vast majority of families are Hispanic, but it offers insights applicable to preschools in communities with only a small Hispanic population. It is limited to programs committed to strengthening children's knowledge of the various Hispanic cultures and the Spanish language as they teach English, although not all preschool programs use a bilingual strategy to teaching English literacy.

### Outreach and Parent Involvement Strategies

Despite the initial reluctance of Hispanic families to send their children to preschool, many do ultimately decide on enrolling them as a result of persuasive and culturally sensitive recruitment strategies. Similar strategies also promote parent involvement during their children's school attendance. In fact, parent involvement is frequently the only common denominator among successful education programs for all children (Lewis, 1993).

Preschool recruiters in the Hispanic community are not necessarily associated with a particular school. They may be church leaders, members of community-based organizations (CBOs) or job training staffs, social service providers, or even pediatricians, but they share the goal of ensuring that young children receive an effective early education (Lewis, 1993).

It is best for recruiters to communicate with parents about the benefits of preschool using the parents' native language if their English language skills are limited, in person, on the telephone, and in notes. Using their native language, even when parents are bilingual, promotes trust as well as better communication. Meetings should be held in conveniently located and neutral locations (i.e., not schools or other possibly intimidating environs), and child care, transportation, and snacks should be provided. Scheduling should take parents' work schedules into account. Face-to-face contact is most effective, and home visits can be useful. Obviously, parents should not be made to feel as if their parenting is inadequate, or that there are not benefits to be derived from drawing on an extended family for child rearing. In fact, some families may assume that grandparents are included in all invitations from school. Recruiters should treat families as equals, be patient, and expect to have several interactions before families become willing to enroll their children in preschool ("Considering Ethnic Culture," 1993; Blakes-Greenway, 1994; Landerholm, Rubenstein, & Losch, 1994; Espinosa, 1995).

It is important for recruiters to recognize that some parents, particularly immigrant and poor parents, may not agree that children will benefit academically from early childhood education. Rather than try to change parents' beliefs, recruiters can initially emphasize advantages of preschool that respond to the way parents actually think about child behavior

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(Zepeda & Espinosa, 1988). The Hispanic Development Project has produced parent materials on cognitive development in English and Spanish that offer useful suggestions for ways to help their children learn while they are engaging in everyday activities with them (Nicolau, Ramos, & Palombo, 1990).

Showing parents how the whole family can benefit from their children's preschool attendance is also an effective recruiting strategy. Providing English language or other skills development classes for adults can bolster parents' belief in the value of the entire program, of which preschool is but one part, and can provide them with an education that can significantly improve the quality of their lives (McCollum & Russo, 1993). Project FLAME, a Federally-funded urban program for Mexican American families, not only teaches literacy skills to the parents and preschoolers, but encourages parents to draw on these skills for personal empowerment when dealing with the various public agencies in their lives. Other attractive parent programs include workshops on topics of great relevance, such as parenting skills, gang awareness, communication and study skills, and vocational training (McLeod, 1996; Espinosa, 1995).

Offering comprehensive services, including case management, can be an important inducement to parents to enroll their children (McCollum & Russo, 1993). Even simply providing parents with information about community medical and social services and with forms they need (i.e., food stamp applications) can promote interest in preschool programs. Surveying parents about their child rearing concerns and soliciting their views on what should be included in the preschool program are ways to demonstrate that their ideas are valued and will be carefully considered (Blakes-Greenway, 1994).

More general recruiting strategies, usually undertaken by preschools themselves, are media releases (in English and Spanish) and brightly colored leaflets distributed to churches, CBOs, and other places where parents can be found. Word-of-mouth is also effective, and parents can be encouraged to share the information about preschools that they receive (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990; (*Pequeñitos en Acción*, 1991).

## Preschool Programs

### Types

The term "preschool" is used to define a wide variety of programs in centers for young children. Some have educational components that consist of just a few minutes a day of direct instruction in skills building of any kind (sometimes delivered by a video presentation). Others use a carefully constructed age-appropriate academic curriculum that fills the day. Some have staffs with degrees in early childhood education and with state certification; others employ community members whose experience is limited to what they learned from rearing their own children.

Some preschools are profit-making, charge substantial tuition, and respond to a market demand in their program offerings. Others are non-profit, run on very little money by religious or community organizations, and consider their child care function sufficient to attract families.

While certain locally-funded preschools in poorer communities may suffer from a lack of resources of all types, those with Head Start, Even Start, and other government funding may provide a better education than even the most expensive private preschools (Kagan, 1995). Head Start, the largest public preschool program, provides free services to poor children through CBOs, and sets standards for required educational and social and health service components. Staff must help the children meet specific school readiness goals, although each Head Start school is free to design its own program. For example, one goal is to help students develop English literacy skills, but it is left to the individual school to decide whether to provide bilingual or monolingual instruction. Similarly, the local projects that comprise Even Start, a Federally-funded intergenerational literacy program, have a mandate to work with Head Start, but each is free to choose its own instructional strategy.

### Goals

The most important goal of preschool programs is to develop "the whole child," but most programs are also concerned with serving families. A corollary aim is to prepare teachers and other care givers to work sensitively and effectively with children from diverse backgrounds (Villarreal, 1993).

***For Children***. Goal 1 of the National Education Goals Panel established a set of domains related to the school-readiness of young children that emphasizes overall development but also recommends the early acquisition of literacy skills and some general knowledge. The approach taken by programs to meet the goals may differ considerably in their emphasis, however. Some programs use the developmental approach advocated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, focusing on personal, social, and intellectual development, rather than on academics or school readiness (*Pequeñitos en Acción*, 1991). Other programs are more concerned with ensuring that minority and Limited English Speaking students acquire the skills and knowledge that many other students have when entering school. Some programs use a preestablished curriculum, while others equip their teachers with the principles of child development, awareness of the cultures that children bring to the school, and the techniques of child observation, and then allow the teachers to create their own curriculum based on what the children already know (Williams, De Gaetano, Sutherland, & Harrington, 1985).

Regardless of emphasis, most aim to develop many of the following characteristics and competencies in their students (*Pequeñitos en Acción*, 1991; Villarreal, 1993; Kagan, 1995):

- A positive self-image.
- Social and emotional growth.
- Literacy and language development.
- Expansion of early concepts, independent thinking, and problem-solving skills.
- Cognition and general knowledge.
- Creativity.
- Interest in the natural world, and aesthetic appreciation and expression.
- Respect for human dignity, cultural and linguistic diversity, and the rights of others.
- Motor development.

***For Families***. Helping families learn how to help their children is universal among programs, but limited resources frequently force educators to choose among possible activities. As a result, staff is likely to believe that its first responsibility is to the children, not parents, when choices must be made.

Also, intensive family programs that respond to the needs of parents challenged by poverty and other problems may simply be beyond the ability, and even the will, of most preschool staff. Nevertheless, early childhood educators and policy makers believe that preschool is the obvious place for two-generation service programs. Therefore, preschool programs are increasingly seeking partnerships with other community programs and additional public and private funds (Kagan, 1995).

**Program Philosophy**

It is generally agreed that young children learn most readily when instruction builds on what they already know from experience. Therefore, preschools that serve bilingual and multicultural students draw on the children's native cultures and languages. The philosophy of Project ALERTA, designed for use in a variety of preschool settings, is representative of many other programs in that it "rejects the notion that bilingual perspectives or perspectives that are multicultural are simple additions to a preconceived program. Instead, it maintains that the development of such perspectives pervades the total process of human growth and development...multiculturalism and bilingualism must be interwoven with the entire structure of the program in order to have real meaning for the persons—children or adults—participating in it" (Williams et al., 1985, p. ix). For example, in Hispanic families there are roles for children of all ages, siblings are not separated by age, and they are used to taking care of each other. Therefore, multicultural preschools can create opportunities for multi-age groupings where older children can develop caring skills for younger children and younger children can become accustomed to looking up to role models ("Considering Ethnic Culture," 1993).

**Basic Skills Programs**

Most early education programs emphasize literacy development—monolingual in English or Spanish, or bilingual—in the belief that it is the key to overall cognitive development. Thus, the most effective instructional programs consist of a high level of functional communication between teachers and students, and collaborative learning where small groups of children work together on a project or to solve a problem. These programs discourage lecturing by teachers and individualized work tasks that limit student speech (Garcia, 1995). Some preschool programs integrate teaching skills to children and parents together in the belief that both will learn more readily when doing so together.

One effective literacy activity for children and adults is story telling and writing. Students create stories based on their culture and experiences with words, and illustrate them by drawing and cutting and pasting pictures from magazines. For parents unaccustomed to reading to their children, this lesson provides a way to ease them into an unfamiliar but important home learning activity (Landerholm et al., 1994). At a Chicago preschool, family science lessons are planned around food so that Limited English Speaking students can see the items being discussed, learn their English names through multiple repetitions by the teacher, and learn the lesson even though much of it may be in an unfamiliar language (Landerholm et al., 1994).

**Bilingual Instruction**

The primary goal of bilingual preschool programs is to help children develop their first language skills as fully as possible, and to help them learn a second language, which they may not know at all upon entering preschool or may already be using to some extent. An example of this approach is *Un Marco Abierto*, which operates according to the belief that teaching in a child's first language builds esteem and pride in family and community (*Pequeñitos en Acción*, 1991). The National Association of the Education of Young Children has a particularly strong position on the importance of strengthening children's native language; a recent position paper asserts that "loss of their home language may result in *the disruption of family communication patterns, which may lead to the loss of intergenerational wisdom; damage to individual and community esteem; and the children's potential nonmastery of their home language or English*" ("NAEYC Position Statement," 1996, p. 5).

A common philosophy, exemplified by Project ALERTA, is that language learning is never taught separately from the content of learning activities. While children may use more than one language in a conversation while they are learning a second language, teachers use only one language per instructional sequence, acting out meanings as they speak to facilitate comprehension. Gradually, through repetition of words and phrases used in lessons based on their experiences and prior knowledge, children's comprehension increases (Williams et al., 1975).

## Staff Qualifications and Development

Preschool staff members may vary widely in their education level, training, and experience, although schools that receive public funding may have to employ teachers who meet certain credentialing criteria. Small preschools in poor areas serving predominantly minority children are more likely than others to have inadequately trained staff because they have access to fewer community resources and parents can pay only minimal amounts for enrollment. Their staffs are likely to be comprised of female community members, some of whom do not have even a high school diploma and many of whom receive neither general child care training nor direction about curriculum or learning activities (Reginatto, 1993). Some staff without formal teacher education training do complete a special preschool education program, however.

Educators agree that, regardless of other competencies, teachers of non-native English speaking children should be able to communicate in the children's home language and must be sensitive to their cultural background because adults' cultural background affects the ways they communicate with children (Lewis, 1993; "NAEYC Position Paper," 1996). Most educators also believe that at least some members of the staff must share the native cultures of the students.

Since it is inevitable that some teachers have misconceptions about the characteristics of particular population groups, and even prejudices, it is useful to confront such beliefs directly in training in order to dispel them (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Becoming a role model for the celebration of cultural diversity, and establishing a classroom climate of acceptance, respect, and self-appreciation, should be key functions of teachers (Reginatto, 1993).

Along with more traditional preschool coursework, pre- and inservice training should include strategies to improve family literacy (Mulhern, Rodriguez-Brown, & Shanahan, 1994). Some specific training areas for working with children include (*Pequeñitos en Acción*, 1991; McLaughlin, Blanchard, & Osanai, 1995; "NAEYC Position Paper," 1996):

- Working with young children.
- Language acquisition.
- Second-language learning.
- Use of translators.
- Working with diverse families.
- Sociolinguistics.
- Assessment of language development.
- Cross-cultural communication.
- The politics of race, language, and culture.
- Community involvement.

## Conclusion

Hispanic parents should be encouraged to enroll their children in preschool, both to provide them with important school readiness skills and to provide their families with a range of services that will improve all aspects of their lives. The programs must be family-friendly and affordable, and they must provide culturally sensitive, bilingual, and educationally rich experiences for the children.

**— Wendy Schwartz**

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